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ABSTRACT

To help children better understand and exert control over the use of narrative language, teachers need not only to devote time to children's literature, but also need to emphasize other narrative forms including the mass media and children's own stories (in their talk, writing, drawing, and play). Giving children experience in mass media techniques can play a key role in language education. They can write and publish a newspaper or magazine, or prepare a "radio" program using a cassette recorder. In carrying out projects such as these, certain key concepts must be understood: (1) how to select material; (2) how to construct a media product; (3) the purposes of a media product; (4) how to represent ideas, people, and events; (5) how stereotypes allow communication to draw upon commonly held attitudes and beliefs; (6) the inherently biased nature of a media product; and (7) children's extensive, though unarticulated, knowledge of media conventions. (SRT)

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This PEN explores in a general way the relationship between writing and media production processes. It is not an exhaustive study of these processes as applied to all media, but rather one that provides ideas and activities suited to the simplest classroom technology, and intended to highlight selection possibilities and the effects they can have on the final product. This in no way denies the power that other media —TV and film in particular—have on the imagination of children.

Who tells stories? Is it only children and 'primitive cultures'? When we as individuals or as cultures 'grow up', do we leave stories behind?

Traditional written language tasks between kindergarten and year 12 reveal a change of emphasis from the 'milk' of personal story writing during the early years, to an almost exclusive preoccupation with 'finding the facts' by answering questions, and organising them into a formal analysis through essay writing (the 'meatier' substance that comprises much of the secondary curricula). One British high school student has commented:

> It was only in English that we got to express our thoughts and feelings on different subjects. But I suppose we must write about true facts to learn different things.[1]

She seems to have reluctantly assimilated the twentieth-century western world's rejection of a subjective account of the world—as rendered to ourselves and to others through our stories of thoughts, feelings, experiences, dreams—looking instead for the 'true' scientific explanation of things, derived from 'objective' data.

By contrast, anthropologists such as Levi-Strauss have attested to the power and centrality accorded to story in many non-western cultures. Laurens van der Post was so profoundly influenced by the significance of story to the Kalahari bushmen, that he became convinced that it is the force which nurtures and promotes civilisations. He has suggested that the destruction of cultures comes about when foreign, physically powerful cultures usurp the stories of less powerful ones.[2]

Indeed, even in the western world, it is not only children and professional authors who are storytellers. All people tell stories, both to themselves and to others, in images, thought, speech and print. We do this in the form of dreams and daydreams, reverie and anticipation, through gossip and anecdotes, during explanations and accounts of events, when writing diaries and letters, and in a host of other daily activities. Aidan Chambers, British writer and critic of books for children, has this to say about the pivotal role played by narrative language in our lives:

> I would say this particular form of language and our skill in using it, empower us in being what we are, and make it possible for us to conceive of being more than we are.

And elsewhere,

> Telling stories is the way people discover meaning. . . Story-making is not simply an aspect of being human; it lies at the heart of what makes us human.[3]

Rather than diminishing the space and time allowed to both oral and written narrative during schooling, teachers need to actively promote children's awareness of narrative language and their expertise in using it, because this is the way by which we individually 'come to know' about the world. As Harold Rosen writes,

> The resolute insistence on narrative in education in defiance of other priorities is then at the very heart of the attempt to keep meaning itself at the centre of language education.[4]

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Narrative in the late twentieth century

Much public talk sets the traditionally recognised form of narrative, 'literature', in opposition to the more pervasive twentieth-century narrative modes of the mass media, both print and electronic. Generally this talk assesses literature as having an intrinsically greater 'value', using such criteria as 'requires greater use of imagination'. It is, however, perhaps more useful to consider literature and the mass media as sharing a common heritage, but existing as disparate forms offering differing experiences. That is, to see them as aspects of the many alternative 'ways of seeing' that are encompassed in the term Narrative. Moreover, recent trends in ways of thinking about book narrative can provide useful insights into ways of talking about and composing for the mass media.

Reader-response theory, for example, suggests that a text, rather than having only one 'true' meaning (known by the author), possesses a plurality of meanings: that every time an individual engages with a text, he or she creates a unique 'story or reading'. 'Open' texts acknowledge and develop this responsibility on the part of the reader. They 'show' rather than 'tell'. More 'closed' texts, by comparison, perceptibly dictate a particular stance to be adopted by the reader. By attempting to compose in both fashions children can become more aware of how narrative language can be used in different ways for different purposes. Looking at advertising might be an easy way into this.

Advertisers favour closed texts as they have a financial interest in getting a preferred meaning across to their target audience. But you can have fun opening advertisements by 'disrupting' either the slogan/text or the associated image(s). And you can contrast them with the more open approach of the rock video clip—a form of advertisement for the band—which usually allows a range of diverse interpretations.

You might then move on to look more closely at the narrator of a story (often assumed to be the author). The narrator of any story is its 'voice', the answer to the 'who is speaking?' question. The narrator might not remain constant throughout the text; the narrator might appear to be impersonal, even non-existent, although any narrative statement must have somebody who has 'done the telling'. By looking more closely at the function of the narrator we can begin to examine carefully how a text is made. The relative presence or absence of narrator, for example, might be an indication of the extent to which the author wishes to convince a reader of the 'objective truth' or 'subjective reality' of a narrative event. It might help here to find a newspaper report which includes an eyewitness account, showing the 'intrusion' of first-person narrator into a third-person text, and then to compare it with another report written entirely in the third person. Thus we can begin to look at the 'point of view' from which a text is oriented. With whom is the reader meant to sympathise? What is the reader's alignment to be? Why?

By beginning to enquire more closely into the makings of a text—be it book, TV program, newspaper, radio report or magazine—children can not only mature in their own writing, but also become more discriminating in their approach to, and assessment of, the public ways of using stories. Stories can promote or prevent new ways of seeing; they can change the ways in which we view ourselves and our place in the world.

In the classroom

If teachers are eager to help children better understand and exert control over the use of narrative language, they will not only devote time and energy to children's literature, but to other narrative forms, including the mass media, and to children's own stories (in their talk, writing, drawing and play). We need to make ourselves responsible for introducing children to the range of story—in its many forms and from many cultures. We need to initiate and promote talk about stories—how they are made, and how they relate to the lives of the young listener/reader/viewer. We must allow children to express their responses through narrative ('that was like what happened to me one time . . .') and encourage and help them to find for themselves the 'patterns' that exist within and between texts, and between texts and life as they have experienced it. Most importantly, perhaps, we need to become the listeners when children become actively involved in 'storytalk'.

1 Stephen Eyers and John Richmond, *Becoming our own Experts: The Vauxhall Papers*, Talk Workshop Group, [UK], 1982, p.10.
2 Laurens van der Post and Jane Taylor, *Testament to the Bushmen*, Viking, Harmondsworth, 1984.
3 Aidan Chambers, *Booktalk: Occasional Writing on Literature and Children*, Bodley Head, London, 1985, p.3; 'In which you become the Hero', in Ena Noel (ed.), *Changing Faces: Story and Children in an Electronic Age*, IBBY Australia Publications, Sydney, 1984, pp.21-22.
4 Harold Rosen, *Stories and Meanings*, National Association for the Teaching of English, [UK], n.d., p.26.

Giving children experience of mass media techniques can play a key role in language education in the late twentieth century. Both the print and electronic media provide children with a motive for writing and a definite purpose; they ask for and exercise a variety of language skills and they allow children to find out about the nature of particular kinds of stories.

Children really enjoy having their work published. Seeing what they have done in print or on a screen, or listening to it, makes them feel it has an extra legitimacy, even professionalism, which can do an enormous amount for their self-esteem—and their teachers' too. The audience aimed at can encompass the whole school and may range beyond it. After all newspapers can circulate in the local community and video and audio cassettes can be taken home.

Involving children in the writing or 'composing' process for any of the mass media usually calls for teamwork and certainly asks that certain procedures be followed. For example, children producing a newspaper or magazine need to:

- research information
- select ideas
- put them together in a particular arrangement
- gear the material for a particular audience
- sub-edit it
- edit it
- position it with related material
- design the page
- add photos, captions, headlines.

Children preparing a 'radio' program with a simple cassette recorder have to:

- research and gather information
- discuss what will be selected for inclusion
- develop a script or program outline
- mark out information and interview segments, and choose music and sound effects
- time the program
- record it
- edit it
- present it to an audience.

Children involved in a video or film production also have to think of image, and:

- select a location
- frame the subject
- choose camera angles and camera movements.

The 'composing' process becomes a production process. Every step in the production process involves decisions about what is and what is not to be included, as well as exactly how it will be used. All of these decisions will affect the meaning of the production. Decisions about the audience and the role of advertising will also significantly affect the final 'look' or sound.

The best way of getting children to become familiar with these steps and with the decision-making that goes with them, is to simulate the production process. Many schools do this when they ask their children to produce a school newspaper or a radio or TV program. When children simulate a real production, they begin to learn about the conventions that go with it. A television newsreader, for instance, is usually seen seated behind an uncluttered desk against a relatively neutral background to give an impression of authoritative impartiality. By contrast, the roving journalist whom the newsreader introduces is presented standing microphone in hand in front of the scene being reported to give an impression of immediacy and authenticity.

Of course media conventions both facilitate and limit the expression of ideas, so it is important that children experience a diversity of production styles and forms. For example, a group of children might research a theme or event and then choose one of their number to deliver it as a radio bulletin in a simulated studio while they record it. Another group using the same topic might incorporate music and record sounds and 'vox pops' (short answers given by passers-by to a reporter in the street). They must then edit and arrange their recorded material so that it has some shape and coherence. The two programs will generate different understandings of the topic because they have used different conventions, which may also affect the sort of audience they will suit.

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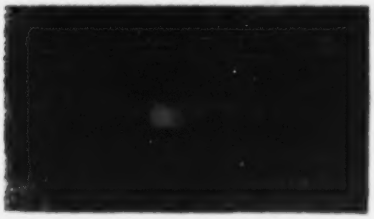


It should now be clear that it's perfectly possible to take a school paper or magazine beyond the reproduction of children's stories, poems and drawings to simulate the publishing experience in all its complexity. Everyone in a primary school can be involved in degrees which take account of the children's different levels of expertise. The modelling of a school paper on a real newspaper, e.g. *The Australian*, extends the possibilities for story writing: stories can be converted into or constructed as media products. Style and content can be manipulated to suit different conventions within the paper, e.g. news or sports reporting, features, editorial, letters, advertising, etc. You can choose specimens, analyse them, model them and reproduce similar examples which serve a purpose and are geared to a particular audience.

When a newspaper is being put together for a school community, or for a larger audience such as *The Australian* has, a range of choices must be considered in the construction/writing process. These fall into three categories.

1 The Overall Construction

How will the newspaper be laid out? Will it have sport and social sections at the back, crossword and puzzles, features, classifieds and film/TV/book reviews in the middle, and news items, editorials and letters to the front? Will there be an art section for drawings and poems? When making these decisions the editorial group or class must decide what will be clearest for the type of audience it has. Perhaps some editorial policies should be made about the selection process. What type of things, if any, are unacceptable in terms of language or subject matter, or even length? Will articles be published in languages other than English? How is copy to be submitted and in what form? What are the deadlines?

2 The Surface Construction

The editors must make a considerable number of decisions here and these may depend upon the type of printing available. Is a word-processor to be used? Are articles to be accepted in handwritten form and published as such, or are they to be typed? Width of columns, size and type of print (especially the relationship between headline and article) should be considered. A certain typeface can give a different impression of an article, e.g. a romantic or futuristic impression. When and how are graphics to be used? How will headings, graphics, cartoons or photos be used to break up a lengthy story? (The length and style of captions must be decided too.) How will classified advertisements be presented? Where will advertising by sponsors or ads for the school canteen and clothing pool be located? Will the front page preview the rest of the paper, or will it have a feature story, picture and large dramatic headlines?

3 Construction of Individual Items

Decisions about the style of a particular article are made by the school reporters, who may be individuals within the school or groups within a classroom. As we have seen, examination of a newspaper will reveal specific types of language for different items, purposes and audiences—i.e. different registers are being used. When examining a model you can draw attention to the type of language and purpose of the writing. Why is direct or indirect speech appropriate? Does the length or brevity affect the style? (Why are classifieds and most other advertisements so brief?) Using a newspaper as a model for publishing opens up possibilities even for young children, who after little practise can reproduce dramatic headings for their stories. Can't you see 'Girl Wins Marathon' or 'Weekend Bike Toil Climbs'? This is a valuable exercise in changing register and, although simple, it's a task that children happily get involved in, especially if everyone is considered a sub-editor for the newspaper and heading a story is seen as a significant part of the marketing of that story for readers' consumption.

Register varies depending on the purpose of the article it serves. Children enjoy copying the style of classified ads with humour in mind, e.g. 'Lost 1 King Cobra, Alive. Left on Primary Stage.' Second and third class can change first person stories into third person and turn their stories into news reports after very little time spent modelling. Here is an actual example.

> On Sunday my cousin came over to my house and we asked mum if we could let off some crackers. She said 'Yes'. When we let one off it went over the next door neighbour's house and he said, 'Don't let any more go over'.

> **FIRE CRACKERS EXPLODE IN NEIGHBOUR'S HOUSE**
>
> On Sunday a cousin came to John Smith's house. They asked his mum if they could let off some crackers and they were allowed.
>
> When they let one off it went over the next door neighbour's house and he told them not to let any more go over his house.

When a person is interviewed for the paper, the reporter must decide when to use direct speech, i.e. a quote, and when to use indirect speech. Here is another real example.

> Yesterday Mr Collins said he would not send any pupils home from school 'unless they have a very good reason'. He went on to say that the temperature in mid-summer was not sufficient reason to leave school.

Since the 1930s senior journalists have taught generations of cadets that intros should answer at least four questions:

Who? Where?
What? When?

The purpose of the intro is to tell the bones of the story in one short paragraph or long sentence, enticing the reader to read on. When news items are written, these elements can be drawn out of the story for the intro and the text of the story will flow from it.

The authenticity of the newspaper production is strengthened if newspaper language is used, e.g. copy deadlines, editors, sub-editors, readers/audience/public, intros, feature articles, special reports.

Electronic Approaches

The most accessible approach to the electronic media is through simple radio production. You can involve children in activities which heighten their awareness of the language of sound, and show them some of the selection processes possible and some of the conventions of the medium. More complex simulations may call for careful analysis of broadcast radio programs and can give the children experience of some of the pressures and constraints that a deadline and a real audience create.

Children can also do audience research on the response to their programs and write a report with recommendations. The information gathered might itself form the basis of a program and the recommendations can be absorbed to help shape the style and content of future programs.

Simple Activities

• A small group of children use a simple cassette recorder and microphone to record a fraction of a sound, e.g. the '***ding***' only of a typewriter at the end of a line of typing. They then record another part of the sound as well as the ***ding***, e.g. the ***ding*** and the ***carriage return***. A third recording is made, this time including the ***ding***, the ***carriage return*** and the ***first key typed***. The group then plays its recording to the class, which is asked to guess the identity of the mystery sound as each short recording is heard in turn.

A game like this highlights the way in which sound carries information and creates meaning.

• Children devise a very simple story and plan a radio script using sound only, except for one or two key words. In the planning (i.e. script development) the children have to consider background sounds, sounds to be emphasised—even exaggerated, the sequence of sounds and the sound-story structure.

• Children plan and practise interviewing techniques, giving careful attention to their use of eye-contact to involve the interviewee, the form of their questions, their ability to create trust and release information, and their use of the microphone. After a little practice they can start recording.

• Children conduct interviews in different contexts which either support or undercut the interviewee's statements. For example, a child might pretend to be a teacher asserting that school attitudes are positive and healthy whilst the noise of a playground riot can be heard in the background. The 'teacher' might then be interviewed in a quiet office, where a short telephone call is the only interruption.

Obviously the selection of the sound environment can significantly affect the audience's understanding of what is being said.

More Advanced Activities

• Children listen to a recording of one or more radio commercials, preferably including a jingle and spoken information. Then, taking the structure of the advertisement(s) as a model, they improvise some of their own.

• Small groups of children are asked in turn to select a sequence from a series of still photographs and then develop a sound commentary to accompany them. Afterwards the children compare the results from the different groups and their diverse interpretations. Having had this experience, they can reflect on the ways in which the commentary of a TV reporter or narrator affects the interpretation of the purely visual coverage.

• Children put together two programs which present the school in a positive and a negative light. They might like to gear their programs to particular audiences for particular purposes, e.g. to attract more pupils, or to make out a case for increased funding.

• Children plan a survey to gain a profile of the class as a target audience. The questions should elicit their age and gender, and a picture of their most common eating habits, leisure activities, clothing needs, family background, spending power and other interests. The profile can be presented with the main points summarised, and the summary used as a basis for the development of a radio or TV program, perhaps with advertisements.

• An older group of children might use the results of their audience profile research to design a poster to attract advertising to a radio station broadcasting to that audience. Buses and newspapers can often be seen 'selling their audiences' in this way and their example may be a helpful guide to style and presentation.

• Children simulate a radio news broadcast by:
(1) establishing the style of their mythical station by modelling it on a particular radio news program;
(2) setting a deadline for a 'live-to-air' transmission (i.e. a recording made without stopping);
(3) surveying the day's newspapers to find suitable stories;
(4) translating the selected stories into their station style;
(5) broadcasting the program within a limited time—'live to air'.

This kind of experience can provoke discussion of the ways in which the pressure of a deadline, the decision-making process used and the station's style of presentation affect the information put to air. A similar exercise is described in more detail in an excellent booklet, *Newsalive*, produced in 1983 by the NSW Department of Education and distributed by Burwood Teaching Resources Centre, 2 Railway Parade, Burwood NSW 2134.

• A review of the radio program describing its content, appeal and the involvement of individual children in its production might be placed in the school newspaper. So might promotional writing about the program's presenters.

Visual Extensions

You can extrapolate the considerations identified in the section on newspaper production to a television news production by taking account of the overall construction of the program, its various segments and the specific kinds of reporting needed, while paying particular attention to the visual conventions employed.

The activities which use cassette recorders can easily be extended and applied to a television and film context, where sound, words and image work together to tell stories and convey information.

The production processes rely on an understanding of certain key concepts:

Selection

Material is selected to be communicated; techniques are selected to communicate the information; authorities may be selected to speak about it; audiences are selected as target audiences.

Construction

A media product is therefore constructed or 'put together' with material from here and there by a number of different people who all bring to it their own experiences and biases (whether conscious or unconscious).

Purpose

Media productions have specific purposes. A television station may be motivated to sell audiences to advertisers whilst entertaining and informing those audiences. An FM community radio station or a government-sponsored commercial may be trying to sway public opinion rather than sell a product.

Representation

Ideas, people, events are represented. They don't appear in the media; rather they are interpreted and re-presented. President Reagan is not on television; his edited speech and his videotaped image are. The image will have been shot from a particular angle, in a particular context, with particular lighting.

Stereotyping

Stereotypes allow communication to draw upon commonly held attitudes and beliefs about people and their views of the world.

Bias

The fact that the production and the final media item will have been *constructed* from *selected* material, will *represent* an idea or event and may use certain *stereotypes* means that it will inevitably be *biased* and will serve the interests of certain people and not of others.

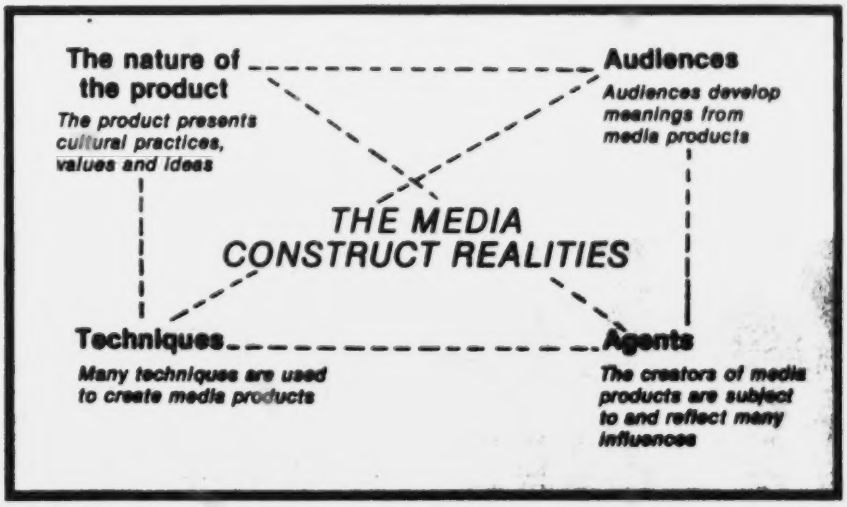
It is important that children consider bias as integral to the production and that they begin to think about whose point of view is being expressed even in their own small productions.

Questioning

Having experimented with simple media production, children should be well placed to ask some of the following questions of the media they interact with everyday:

- Who has put the production together?
- What audiences are being aimed at?
- For what purpose?
- What techniques have been used?
- How have they been used?
- What conventions have been used?
- What impact have the use of these techniques and conventions had on what is being communicated?
- Whose point of view is being put forward?

Children bring to school a wealth of knowledge about the world which they have gained through their media experiences—with television, radio, posters, newspapers, magazines, and even computer games. They also bring an extensive, though often unarticulated, knowledge of media conventions, which often exceeds that of their teachers. It can be tapped, developed and applied when asking them to write for the media.


The nature of the product
The product presents cultural practices, values and ideas
Audiences
Audiences develop meanings from media products
THE MEDIA CONSTRUCT REALITIES
Techniques
Many techniques are used to create media products
Agents
The creators of media products are subject to and reflect many influences

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